

approach to fixing the problem, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in the process.

In response to the VA disaster, on the other hand, the President has dispatched just a single staffer to oversee the investigation. This is not acceptable. As Commander in Chief our Armed Forces, the President should be leading the charge to fix this problem, but he hasn't even spoken publicly about it for weeks.

Regardless of the President's inaction, Congress must take immediate step to address this crisis. This week the House of Representatives is taking up a version of Senator RUBIO's bill, the Department of Veterans Affairs Management Accountability Act, which would allow the VA Secretary to fire or demote senior executives in the department when warranted.

Private organizations can fire employees who fail to fulfill their responsibilities. We ought to be able to fire officials who fail in their obligation to our veterans.

Yet all we have seen from the VA is the resignation of the Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Petzel, who was already planning to retire—hardly the accountability our veterans deserve.

I have introduced a bill to require the VA inspector general to conduct a national investigation into the wait times veterans face. It is essential that we get an idea of the full scope of this problem so we can ensure that it gets fully fixed.

Under my bill the inspector general will have 6 months to investigate and submit a report to Congress. In the meantime, the VA would be forbidden from closing any of its medical facilities.

No facility—not the Hot Springs facility in my State of South Dakota or any other—should be closed unless we make very sure that veterans' care is not going to be affected.

There are other bills this body should be considering as well, including Senator HELLER's bipartisan legislation, to reduce the backlog of veterans' disability claims, and I hope the Senate will take them up quickly.

This crisis can't wait. There is every likelihood that right now—right now—veterans around our country are still failing to receive the care they need. I hope the President of the United States will come to his senses and treat this situation with the seriousness it deserves.

If he won't act, Congress must. It is the very least that we owe our veterans.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. (Ms. HEITKAMP). The Senator from Georgia.

WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ACT

Mr. ISAKSON. Madam President, this year Congress has not particularly been noted for much of an accomplishment of anything. We have been in clo-

ture atrophy and we have been in political atrophy, but we are about to change that for a day.

I want to pause for a moment and acknowledge the hard work of a number of Members in the House and the Senate on what is known as the Water Resources Development Act, which soon will be on the floor of the Senate, and I understand will be on the floor of the House today for its ratification.

The Water Resources Development Act is the authority of the U.S. Government to move forward on infrastructure across the country.

I congratulate Chairman SHUSTER in the House and Chairman BOXER in the Senate for their hard work on the conference committee.

Ranking Member VITTER has been an untold hero for us and working hard for the Senate.

I give thanks to Sylvia Burwell of the OMB. She has been a lifesaver for us on the Port of Savannah. I appreciate her cooperation and her help.

I thank Vice President BIDEN. We did a tour of ports on the east coast of the United States to focus on the importance of improving our infrastructure.

In this WRDA bill are improvements across the country, but the one I want to talk about for a second is an example of why infrastructure is so important, and that is expansion of the Savannah Harbor and the deepening project in the Savannah at the Port of Savannah. That is a project that was authorized 16 years ago—the year I was elected to the House of Representatives. It was authorized to be built, but it hasn't been expanded for 16 years or authorized for 16 years because of environmental concerns, atmospheric concerns, sometimes funding concerns, and sometimes political apathy concerns. But finally everyone has their act together. NOAA has endorsed it, Fish and Wildlife has endorsed it, the EPA has endorsed it, and the Corps of Engineers has endorsed it.

Thanks to this Water Resources Development Act authorization, a \$706 million project in my State for the southeastern United States will become a reality over the next 5 years.

Why is it important? It is important for this reason. As we sit and talk today, the nation of Panama is widening and deepening the Panama Canal. Within a few months, they are going to be taking through the Panamax ships of the 21st century, ships that can carry not 9,000, not 11,000 but 14,000 containers.

Ports along the east coast of the United States, such as the Port of Savannah, are not able to take that deep of a ship. They will have to wait until high tide to bring it in and then have to wait a day for high tide to come back to take the ship out. That costs money, and it causes people to divert to other ports, to other countries, and it hurts our economy.

Over the next 5 years as we deepen the Savannah River and Savannah Harbor, and as we improve that port, we

are improving the opportunity for the entire southeastern United States to grow, prosper, and be competitive in the 21st century. The Port of Savannah directly contributes to 297,000 jobs in our State. It contributes to 49 of the 50 States on the continental United States. It provides jobs, economic vitality, tax revenues, and prosperity for America. Its time has come.

I am so delighted the Water Resources Development Act is done. I am so delighted that Chairman BOXER, Ranking Member VITTER, and Chairman SHUSTER have put their teams together, dotted the last "i" and crossed the last "t."

I encourage everybody in the Senate to ratify prosperity, employment, and economic development for America. When the bill comes before the Senate, ratify the Water Resources Development Act and that final conference committee report.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. REED. I rise to discuss again the urgent need to restore emergency unemployment insurance.

Like many Americans, I am hopeful about our future but concerned about how the great recession has impacted our fellow Americans, particularly those who have been hit the hardest—the long-term unemployed. These are good people from all walks of life, from all 50 States. They are people who work in a variety of fields, from high tech to manufacturing, from cubicles and offices to plants and factory floors.

Many of them are older and find themselves out of work for the first time in decades. All of them, all 2.78 million of them, lost out on December 28 of last year. While they have been looking for jobs, Congress has failed to do its job and restore unemployment insurance.

Previously, Congress had never let emergency benefits expire when the long-term unemployment rate was so high. Today's long-term unemployment rate is 2.2 percent, and it is still well over the highest rate, 1.3 percent, of previous expirations.

In the past, when the rate was this high for long-term unemployment, we maintained these benefits. This is still an emergency, and we have to maintain these benefits. It still requires our attention and swift bipartisan action.

To the Senate's credit, there has been bipartisan action. Thanks to my Republican colleague from Nevada, Senator DEAN HELLER, and a coalition of 10 Senators—5 Democrats and 5 Republicans—the Senate passed a 5-month extension of these vital benefits that would provide aid to job seekers who have been searching for work for more than 26 weeks. Senators on both sides of the aisle recognize this is the right thing to do for workers and the smart thing to do for our economy.